

To Post, or Not to Post?

Eloghosa Osunde contemplates the role of marginalized artists in online activism.

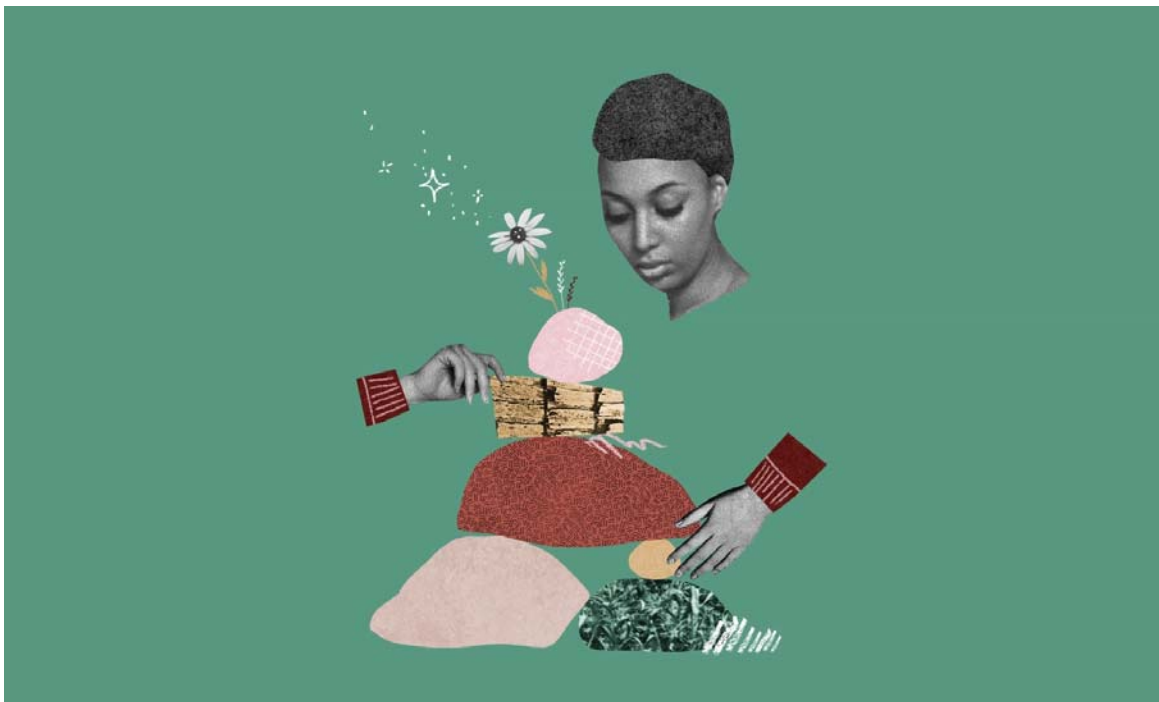


Illustration by [Natalie Nelson](#)

[Eloghosa Osunde](#) | [Longreads](#) | September 2018 | 18 minutes (4,515 words)

It's another day with tragic news — as are most days these days. It's always something. If not race-related violence in America, it's suicide bombings in northern Nigeria or the massacre in Plateau State or a trailer falling over a bridge in Lagos and crushing people to death; or that fuel tanker exploding on Otedola bridge, eating multiple vehicles and people in a billowing tower of black smoke; or it's another #metoo story; or some more violence against LGBTQIA+ people across the world. Or it's the suicides. Those backtobacktoback suicides.

“Watch out for your faves who are quiet on this matter,” says the tweet, “because silence is complicity.” I scroll down two more to figure out which of the matters we're discussing now, even though I know I

shouldn't have. As I suspected, it's a noisepool of rage, triggering link and photos attached. But I'm in it now.

“Your silence will not protect you, it's better to speak knowing that we were never meant to survive – Audre Lorde.’ #enoughsaid,” says another tweet. “Share your stories, let's name and shame these monsters. By not sharing, we're giving them more power and they might do it to someone else!”

“People are literally dying” says a tweet linking to a video of a woman with a great body, in a neon dress, “and children are being put in cages!” 1.4 thousand likes.

I scroll faster.

Further down, an author is announcing their publication date but prefaces the thread with an apology. “I know this is a difficult time, and I feel bad having to do this now but please —” It's not the first time I've seen this, either. It's been less than 10 minutes on the app, and between those minutes and these tweets, there's now a brick tower of anxiety in my chest.

On Instagram: “If you ever wondered what you'd have been doing during slavery or the holocaust or the civil rights movement, you're doing it right now.” Following that, information about another tragedy. *Do something!* the post adds. *It takes less than ten minutes!*

In response, I go madder. I think to myself that if I'm feeling this from the comfort of my bedroom, then what everyone in the bloodshot eye of each violence must be experiencing must be a million times worse, and it makes me hate the world even more strongly. So, I retweet, repost, retweet people talking about each issue, even though I know I won't be able to look at my profile afterwards. It's all fury now, fueling and felling me at the same time. I'm thinking (knowing?) — obsessively, manically — that the world is drooling at the mouth with wicked intention for all of us, that nowhere feels safe, no one is safe and we're all fucked. That voice settles in me, grows a sturdy femur, and I feel it happening: that indifferent stroll towards the cliff that my brain does. *There's no point being here*, it tells me, sounding bored and done, *let's go*. My brain means it. And that's how I know I'm in trouble

Two years ago, I tried to *go*. After that attempt; after the sharp-mad obsession with *going* was sedated by medication and three days in a ward I never want to see again, I made a promise to myself not to get involved with anything that makes it more difficult to stay alive. Still, as a hyper-empath who's lived with severe depression and anxiety for years, sometimes I find that aliveness unfolds with a rippling weight, and only after carefully calculated effort. When I'm especially fragile, this feeling is made worse in my hand, in the scrolling and freezing that follows, by all the voices shouting out of the screen. *Complicit! Indifferent! Accountability!* My body always sends out a strong message: an in-case-you-forgot-what-this-kind-of-engagement-does-to-us reminder, delivered in aches, spreading quickly through the width of my chest and into my back. It's a thing I still don't understand: the physical reaction my body has to bad news; how hearing it causes unbearable cramps and a dizzying headache that brings my body to a unignorable slowing-down, like I'm happening in reverse. But it's happened so often that by now, my friends and family know to shield me accordingly.

“Someone who's followed my work for years DM'd me explaining that after a certain point, activism is your responsibility if you have a platform.”

Sometimes though, I don't see it coming. And when it does, I have a routine: I count my reasons as fast as I can and make my case for aliveness, before my brain stops listening and takes over. A safe and chosen family, love, imminent freedom, the books I'm writing, places in the world I haven't seen, dancing, all the books I haven't read, music I haven't heard yet. And when all else fails: out of spite. I know the drill. But when I wake up from my nap this time, I think, *I should go outside, I should go outside, I've been indoors for days*. And I can't. I can't move or work. I'm frozen, and everything smells like smoke.

(Delete. Delete. Deactivate.)

The general sentiment online these days is that we cannot afford to look away from the carnage, that it is irresponsible to do so, that the anger must stay fanned, must grow bigger and persist. *We cannot afford to forget.* That if we're online and have access to everything falling apart, the least we can do is add our voices to the furor. The more voices, the better the chance the message will be heard. This is our shared role in the war: speaking up, staying angry enough to act, being up in arms, fighting back one post at a time. This is how we show we care for the communities we're part of. Never by being silent, because silence means you're either uncaring, or indifferent or unaffected, or even worse, so insulated by your own reality that you are (or are becoming) unseeing. And isn't that how you make a monster? Let it feel like having a heart is optional.

So you, non-monster, wonder where to face. The issue everyone is mad about right now? But there's more than one. Especially if you're in multiple Twitterverses, straddle multiple margins and as such, stay close to a series of violences. For example, if you mostly follow artists and Africans and Black Americans and queer people then you know that in each of these spaces, the world keeps crumbling from sky to concrete, its entire architecture buckling in the fall. And seeing as we're all caught in the same crowded wound, each of us has at least one thing in the world per day to be furious about, so, which one? You do the emotional mathematics: if you subtract the helplessness that lifts when you talk frankly about x from the heavy personal cost of taking on a topic this close to home, do you find what's left to be stomachable in the end? Now start the equation again, multiplying the cost by four if your brain is already on the edge. Now write your answer on a piece of paper and put it where no one else can see it. Then fight anyway.

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about the word "role." That is: in the midst of true chaos, who belongs where, who should carry what weapons; when? Turning it over in my head, I've considered the functionality and uses of the word, especially with regard to online activism, to the general emphasis on *doing something*, and *using our*

platforms to talk about our world at present. Because our world, as we all know, is a mercurial mess and recent days have felt like being forced to watch the ruins from a kind of amorphous, non-localized war (deaths on deaths on deaths in headlines, a heap of unrelated bodies, emptied of breath), this question resurfaces often. It's felt like being charged up, being reminded that we are not at peace, that it's our duty to fight the other side where the injurers are, where those who want to erase us have remained for centuries.

Fair. But I've been wondering if there are alternative ways to fight. If there are multiple places for us — artists of color especially — to busy our hands.

Battles are frightening, aren't they? Especially knowing that whether you will win or lose is based on the relative strength of your fighters against the other team. It's a lot of pressure. So we train our fighters, we make them hard and ready to push back when the opponents come. We want a free world where we're all allowed to breathe, so we fight back against racist leaders, neglectful politicians, sexist men, unrepentant abusers, violent homophobes, failing infrastructure. A kickback for each kick, clapbacks and sharp jabs, heavy threads and tense sparring, six-stone slings for all possible Goliaths. We all pick our roles — and it feels useless at times, to only be able to write arresting stories and love thoroughly; cook well and take care of people; give hugs and make playlists, when there are bodies falling outside. But sometimes, it's all that is left.

My discomfort with people insisting others *speak up* online is nowhere near nascent. Some years ago, fed up with this same take, I tweeted something about people *insisting* artists comment on every tragedy being unnecessary at best and harmful at worst. Someone who's followed my work for years DM'd me explaining that after a certain point, that kind of activism is your *responsibility* if you have a platform. I asked her a simple question: Why did she assume artists weren't taking any action in their real lives? And how could she be sure they weren't affected by what was happening? I was genuinely curious, because I wanted to know if this thing of performing care and outrage that we ask artists and each other to do has a limit, if its advantages are indisputable, if it becomes our inarguable *duty* to each other the bigger

we get. If there are exceptions in people's minds when they make these demands, if we're all remembering that people behind platforms are people with lives and conditions we have no access to. She responded saying something I don't remember specifically, other than that it was unsatisfying. I stopped replying, because the conversation had become pointless to me.

In this case, the artist in question was Solange Knowles. While people debated the legitimacy of her care for Blackness and Black people because she wasn't actively amplifying #BlackLivesMatter online, Solange was working on "[A Seat At The Table](#)," which she released shortly after. The album is something I like to think of as a well-rounded sonic meditation on her experience of Black American life in the present. When it was first released, I sat inside it for days, collecting the sound in soft ripples. People have since written theses and personal essays on the significance of this work on a personal level; about what new vocabularies and audibility the album gives to feelings that had been sitting in their bodies like scrambled white noise. Whether I relate to it on that level or not is hardly the point, because this is her work, which she made, largely undocumented on social media until it was through. This is her work, which has made the mess of this world at least a little bit more bearable for some. That conversation is relevant again now because I've since seen these same questions asked about other artists of color, including Beyonce — who is known to give insane amounts of herself to her work and audience. At Coachella, Beyonce gave a flawlessly executed all-Black-bodied performance that blew the internet open and led to the entire event being rechristened in her name. She has, over time, mastered the contours of fan desire and the beastliness of our appetites. But even from her, we want more. It makes sense that this pressure we spread between ourselves around how best to fight finds its highest pressure points with artists we admire, who also share our margins. The world has disappointed us so much, so if they're too quiet for too long, we get anxious, demanding: Why isn't she talking about this cause? What is she doing about this other thing? Whether or not they've proven their loyalty before, we want to know: *Are they still with us? Are they selling out?*

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Again, the echoed argument is that there is no time or room for artists (especially those we believe *should be* affected, by way of the identities they occupy) to maintain neutral ground; that this is the time to be *radical*. But I keep wondering: what is radical about this habit we have of putting artists of color at the fore and telling them to do what we can't? What are we demanding by implying that the only way to show how one is affected by a situation is to not only point to but also publicly articulate their experience of the collective wound, while it is still raw and beating? What is radical about putting the entire weight of our faith on artists in the margins, working them tirelessly like gods demanding work outside their work, more and more sacrifices, because the world has left us with little else to believe in? Deifying artists, making oracles and prophets out of them, is less about them and more about looking for places to hang our faith. But we know this: gods often get treated badly. They're not human, so we assume that they're above feelings or hurt; we praise them for what they can give us, and starve them of affection otherwise. We know this, but we don't stop.

To better understand the pressure, I've pulled lines backwards through histories and made peace with the fact that it's always been that way. you try to tell the world that you have something to say, especially as someone from a background often ignored; if you tell them that you think you're worth listening to, they will try to make you talk about everything. It happened before social media, and social media being a microcosm of the world itself means that these same expectations become amplified. It all comes from a base assumption that a person who can produce brilliant work must be well enough to do other things, that surely they must have the emotional bandwidth to engage in other things that benefit the larger society or to use their voice more

in real time. But to make these wide-net demands seems harmless until we consider who gets caught in the trap, flailing. And it is us, the same people, who for centuries, have been told: *Show me why I should support you. Douse yourself in gasoline and do the angry dance we love.* Black people. Women. Queer people. Disabled people. But we are nobody's saviours. We're people without answers, too, who to varying degrees are all already sore from advocating for ourselves in our lives — against strangers, against life, against even our families.

“Two years I go, I tried to ‘go’. After that attempt; after the sharp-mad obsession with ‘going’ was sedated by medication and three days in a ward I never want to see again, I made a promise to myself not to get involved with anything that makes it more difficult to stay alive.”

Do we consider that brilliant art or large followings and power do not insulate anybody from the world? That relative privilege, as much as it makes our lives easier, does not erase personal trauma? It is, after all, still largely us in the news being assaulted because of the world's gross violences. Even physiologically, sometimes raising your voice too loudly hurts your larynx. What do we think happens, medically speaking, to people who haven't been allowed to stop yelling for years? What do we expect to happen if we believe that to have access to each other's work is to have an everlasting stake in each voice; a right to demand dividends as and when we please? If we are aware of the costs, then who does it serve to keep the burden on each other to keep educating the offenders, to keep speaking up, even when it hurts? We know that people who advocate for others endlessly are usually terrified they won't be heard at all if they stop; so they keep going, even, sometimes, to the detriment of their health and overall wellbeing. They know that after all they do, they can, at any time, become silenced. We all know. So if what we are trying to do is encourage more artists to become activists, my first question is: Why? What does the

world do to people who say yes to that call? How does the world treat its activists?

Within my close artist-friend circle where some of us are neurodivergent, I've seen the impact of feeling the need to say at least something online about current affairs that have been (and sometimes still are) personally traumatic for us. (Are they even current affairs if we've seen and felt these stories all our lives?) And we aren't even the loudest in the world yet. We're only trying to figure things out. But the pressure keeps raining, both from the inside and out. We engage because we don't believe we're affected enough if we choose to unplug to take care of ourselves. But also because when you look like us and are just starting out, there's a fear that your voice being absent from the discourse will have invisible costs, like people making heavy assumptions about your politics or assuming you're not a serious artist and as a result, disengaging from your work — which can directly affect your livelihood. It happens. It continues to happen. So we do it, we send the tweet that says: *Hey, I'm angry too, suffering too, struggling too* — as a way to signal to our communities and supporters that we're still on the right side, that we are worthy of the mantle — only to have to go to our group chats for reminders on why staying alive is worth it. I watch that tradeoff often: Do what is expected, burn out and then shut down for days, gripping the air for reasons. We want to succeed, we want our work to get louder, we want to be supported, so we have to be present where it matters.

More than once, I've contributed my story to viral causes flaring up online because I know it matters to voice, and I know that reading other people's experiences has helped me feel less crazy and more seen. But sometimes, it's an anxiety-filled action to show that it's happening to me too, and when it's not, to show that I'm seeing it; that I am not on *the other side* because I'm silent. At least you've said something, even if it killed you a little. At least we were *seen* saying something, and the helpless feeling can shift.

There have been times for all of us when, genuinely furious, we thought we could handle it and threw ourselves into the fight, making threads, retweeting, archive-digging and amplifying, only to bear the costs later. An honest miscalculation of our limits. But the body, as we know, is attentive in the way it stores information; and sometimes, retraumatization is something you can handle until you can't. The

body, after being forced to endure what we choose, demands both respite and repentance. If we refuse, sometimes it takes everything — including us — completely and by force. So, if these are the only rules — if according to the prevalent sentiment, the only two acceptable ways to be (as a well-supported person) are Activist or Accomplice, then what happens to those of us who inhabit the middle space; those who are both brilliant and exhausted, talented and incapable, aching and still wordless? I don't know most things. What I do know is that if I burn my brain beyond repair, if it becomes unmoored again, then I don't know that I can save my life twice. What I know is that my body cannot lose, because these books must get written; because this process is what threads my sanity together.

In [an always relevant 2015 essay](#), Toni Morrison quoted a friend who told her that the now, when everything is steeped in despair, “...is *precisely* the time when artists go to work.” That work, I believe, is whatever the artist can do well and effectively without experiencing consistently diminishing emotional or mental returns. As far as I know, making work as ourselves, focusing long enough to see it to completion, despite the world, counts as fighting — especially since so many of us are making life-saving manuals, crafting escapes, making joyful alternatives, creating and reimagining futures; conjuring entire realities out of nothing, charting emotional and spiritual cartographies with such meticulous detail. Worldbuilding is urgent work, especially now that our primary world has made itself uninhabitable. So, if the internet is an added citizenship some of us retain specifically to share our worlds more widely, then how do we inhabit it productively as artists, if our distractions become indirect requirements for support?

Black and queer and woman and neurodivergent as I am, I'm wondering if there are wider lenses to look at the conversation from; if there are less damaging signaling codes; if the languages we use in interpersonal relations are elastic. Since we're aware of the state of the world and the direct proportion between this and rising statistics of mental illnesses, should intra-community emphasis remain stubbornly on *responsibility* and online activism as requirement, or on rest and wellness, on sustenance?

“For me as I am, staying alive and breathing long enough to do my work is the most combative thing I can think to do.”

For me as I am, staying alive and breathing long enough to do my work is the most combative thing I can think to do. In the worlds I preside over, I’m intentional about my centers. That work is a fortress of sorts, the one place where I am endlessly powerful, where I can choose better outcomes for my characters than the ones I sometimes feel at the mercy of. If storytelling is where my power is; if it is the one place in the world where I can actually fight, what is neutral or insufficient about that?

Something I’ve come to understand since becoming a full-time writer that when we do things that deplete the spirit or clog us at the heart, it becomes more difficult to do the work we’re good at; the kind where our voices stand apart from echoes, strong enough to shape collective consciousness. When we get distracted by what other people want from us, the work takes longer. And when we leave our roles to underplay the work we do, we don’t win anyway. I’m still learning to be more gentle with myself, to say no to harmful compulsions. I’m learning that I can choose myself and my health over being seen, even when I’m afraid. Inflecting this practice is what helps me extend the same grace to others. (If I acknowledge my own need to rest, I’m less likely to demand compulsory work from someone else.)

I’ve found it troubling that even now with wider conversations around the inner lives of celebrated Black artists whose names have survived generations; even now that we’re openly discussing how badly this world failed them where it mattered, we’re still passively watching alive artists blubber over themselves, apologizing for trying to introduce their work through obvious anxiety. As if we aren’t the conjurers, storybuilders, worldmakers of our time. As if these finished bodies of work aren’t a triumph and a testimony, tangible respite that we’ll still be able to hold and reference years from now, when the tweets and Instagram posts have been washed downstream. As if

between music and paintings, poems and instruments, films and essays, love and tenderness, we aren't the ones saving our own lives.

Our capacities are not all equal and it makes sense, I think, that if we're trying to create a freer world, we also make room for and facilitate the work of people who don't fight the same as us, people among us to whom consuming this news on a daily basis is lethal, because the noise comes for the jugular. Fighting our own impulses to fight ourselves to injurious extents is a worthy war, because this is how we get to keep our lives. But it takes both individual and collective work to deconstruct that voice that tells us we're only worthy when we're angry or reacting or helping the world. To know that even when we're incapable of making or saying anything at all, we're just as valuable, regardless of what the capitalist machine keeps transmitting. To truly understand that even when the world is falling, we deserve our own kindnesses. We deserve our own grace.

In his autobiographical notes, James Baldwin wrote a sentence I hold close: "I consider that I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this: to last... and get my work done." This is, for me, the goal. In the end, not just to be known for how well and hard I work and fight; not just to be lauded for the art I create and the anger I have; but to not be underloved outside that too. To (be allowed to) stay alive — because aliveness is, in itself, the primary work. So what should we do in a war? What should we do now that the world is disintegrating? Whatever else we can do without falling apart. Whatever we can do while keeping ourselves.

We who were raised with compulsory masks, who learned to hide excellently and conform past our natural limits, know how to die well and have died plenty since, while looking alive. So, especially now, with excellent Black, queer, neurodivergent artists of color rising up, what I want to see in worlds both tangible and imagined is fewer avoidable breakdowns and deaths. I want rest for us. I want us to stop demanding suffering of each other. I want the loudest joy to find us in the bone. I want us to last. I want us to guard our interior lives jealously, putting our work before the endless, thankless extra labour the world asks of us specifically because they know we've been groomed to do it. I want us to stop ascribing strength to self-sacrifice

alone, but to facing our work and enjoying its rewards with people who truly care for us. The work inside the work is doing what hasn't been done enough; is being here long enough for all our injurers to see us well and alive, taking up the joyful spaces we deserve. For what they're most frightened of to become exactly so: *They're still here, they're still here and oh god, there's even more of them coming!* Whether in person or online, it's my hope that we develop a culture of strong intra-communal support, of collectively taking and making up more spaces for all of us to become more blindingly alive. And even more than that — healed. Especially in the hidden places.

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